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Border protests involve 'a far-right extreme organization,' Public Safety Minister Mendicino says

BILL CURRY > AND COLIN FREEZE >

OTTAWA AND TORONTO

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Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino arrives for a news conference, on Feb. 16.

ADRIAN WYLD/THE CANADIAN PRESS

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The continuing street [blockades in downtown Ottawa](#) and recent border protests include links to a far-right extremist organization, says the federal Public Safety Minister, as the government defended its decision to invoke the [Emergencies Act](#).

Marco Mendicino pointed to the RCMP's arrest of four Alberta men this week who are accused of plotting to murder RCMP officers.

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Nine other people are facing weapons and mischief offences as part of what police say was a significant and organized threat by a heavily armed group. The arrests took place in [Coutts, Alta.](#), where protesters had been blockading a border crossing,

"The dangerous criminal activity occurring away from the TV cameras and social-media posts was real and organized," Mr. Mendicino said Wednesday in reference to the Alberta arrests.

"It could have been deadly for citizens, protesters and officers. We need to be clear-eyed about the seriousness of these incidents and indeed, several of the individuals at Coutts have strong ties to a far-right extreme organization with leaders who are in Ottawa."

The federal Emergencies Act, which is being enacted for the first time in Canadian history, allows the powers to be in effect as soon as it is invoked by the government. However, several parliamentary oversight provisions apply. The government is required to file a motion and a report on its detailed plans in both the House of Commons and the Senate within seven sitting days. Once those documents are tabled, MPs and senators will debate the motions and they will ultimately be put to a vote.

Supporters of the protests have argued the vast majority of participants are peaceful citizens who oppose COVID-19 restrictions. At times, Wellington Street has featured bouncy castles for children. But federal ministers stressed the gatherings do include extremist elements.

The new powers could allow police to temporarily declare Parliament Hill and other areas as restricted to the public. Police [distributed flyers to protesters in Ottawa Wednesday](#), warning they will face arrest unless they leave immediately.

One of the body-armour vests seized by the RCMP in Alberta had a "Diagolon" patch on it – a reference to a fictional breakaway state stretching from Alaska to Florida. The notion of Diagolon is espoused by Jeremy MacKenzie, a former Canadian forces soldier and Afghan war veteran who has become a radical far-right podcaster.

While Mr. Mendicino did not name any organization during the news conference, his spokesperson, Alexander Cohen, later said the minister's remarks were in reference to Diagolon and recent comments made online by Mr. MacKenzie.

For the past two weeks, Mr. MacKenzie has been broadcasting videos on social media from Ottawa at the site of convoy protests.

[**Data leak reveals Canadians, Americans donated millions to fund convoy protests**](#)

[**Is invoking the Emergencies Act too much? Time will tell**](#)

One of the [four men accused in the murder conspiracy](#) in Alberta is Christopher Lysak. According to the Canadian Anti-Hate Network, Mr.

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Lysak is an associate of Mr. MacKenzie's and was pictured beside him last year and has been referred to as Diagon's security chief.

"Diagon is a concept that was coined by MacKenzie," said Elizabeth Simons, deputy director of the Canadian Anti-Hate Network.

She said he and other podcasters gravitated to conversations about carving out an independent state through violence. Diagon was considered a joke at first before it took on a life of its own, she said, adding that discussions evolved into a cluster of social-media channels, offline networks of people and even a national anthem.

From Ottawa, Mr. MacKenzie has stated on his social-media platforms that he has no knowledge of the alleged conspiracy in Coutts.

In past videos on social media, he has said he left the military in 2017 and got into podcasting. "I was becoming very displeased with the direction the country was heading in that time and it has only accelerated rapidly since then."

Earlier this year, the RCMP charged Mr. MacKenzie with illegal weapons offences after a January raid in Nova Scotia. A search-warrant document alleges Mr. MacKenzie brandished weaponry in a video posted to social media, including "an unpinned high-capacity magazine, a prohibited device." He is to appear in a Nova Scotia court in May.

On the parliamentary discussions over the Emergencies Act, Mr. Mendicino formally tabled the declaration of emergency Wednesday evening, along with related documents, as required under the legislation. The House of Commons is scheduled to debate the declaration on Thursday and a vote could take place as early as that day.

One timing challenge is that the Commons is not scheduled to sit next week and votes do not normally take place on Fridays. The Conservatives have called the Liberal move an "unprecedented sledgehammer" and said a parliamentary vote should occur as soon as possible.

Invoking the Emergencies Act requires the creation of a joint committee of MPs and senators, who will meet in secret to review the powers. The law gives the committee the power to revoke or amend emergency orders.

Conservative interim leader Candice Bergen told reporters her party will vote against the use of the Emergencies Act.

Ms. Bergen said Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has been calling the protesters names and failed to send any signals that their concerns were being heard.

"The first act that he does when he has a chance to do something, he doesn't go through step one, two, three. He goes straight to 100 and evokes the Emergencies Act," she said. "I don't think anything that we will see will change our mind. We will be opposing it."

Conservative MPs have questioned why new powers are needed, given that police have recently been able to resolve border disputes in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba and Ontario without them. Federal ministers counter that the mere announcement of invoking the Emergencies Act, which includes options for freezing the financial assets of participants, likely contributed to ending the border blockades.

NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh said Wednesday that his party does support the invocation of the Emergencies Act, but he added that it does so reluctantly and will be monitoring carefully how the legislation is applied.

Opposition leaders have received a briefing about the scope of powers and how they are being targeted, he added, noting discussion allowed him to be able to express support for it. He said if something comes up in the debate or in the motion that is contrary to the briefing, that will affect the party's decision.

Bloc Québécois Leader Yves-François Blanchet said Quebec does not want the new powers applied in the province. He also said his concern is that once the powers are invoked the first time, it risks becoming easier for governments to invoke them again in the future.

The Prime Minister told reporters Monday morning that it is time for the Ottawa blockade to end. He also pushed back when a reporter suggested he did not seem impatient.

"On the contrary. I just brought in the Emergencies Act for the first time in Canadian history so that law enforcement has concrete tools to ensure that the barricades end," he said in French. "It's time for this to end."

Mr. Trudeau also reiterated that decisions on enforcement will be made by police, not politicians.

With reports from Kristy Kirkup and Marieke Walsh

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